



## The Times-Picayune

### STEAKHOUSE GIANT DIES

**Broad Street restaurant she took over in 1965 now an N.O. icon and multimillion-dollar chain**

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**By John Pope**

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Ruth Fertel, who mortgaged her Gentilly home to buy a restaurant that became the genesis of an international chain now grossing more than \$330 million a year, died Tuesday of cancer at Ochsner Foundation Hospital. She was 75.

By the time of her death, chefs in 82 Ruth's Chris Steak House restaurants across America and in Canada, Mexico, Puerto Rico, Taiwan and Hong Kong were serving up about 16,000 steaks every day. The chain with the name that its founder described as "a tongue twister and a half" consistently won high marks in reader polls conducted by such magazines as Bon Appétit and Restaurants and Institutions. In January 1999, Ms. Fertel sold a majority interest in the chain to a Chicago investment firm.

Magnet for politicians

In New Orleans, the flagship Ruth's Chris, at North Broad and Orleans avenues, achieved mythic status, both as a place to get prime beef and as a required election-eve stop for politicians with a yen to table-hop, preen and play prophet. After elections, it was the spot where losers paid off their bets.

"I have learned everything about politics through my years of dining at Ruth's Chris," said U.S. Sen. Mary Landrieu, D-La. "In New Orleans, Ruth's Chris has become not only a place of business but also a way of life."

Landrieu's statement was prepared for an April 24 tribute to Ms. Fertel, a \$500-per-plate fund-raiser at the Ritz-Carlton for the Ruth U. Fertel Culinary Arts Building at Nicholls State University in Thibodaux. The structure, set to open late next year, is to be part of the Chef John Folse Culinary Institute.

The event will go on as scheduled, organizers said.

Entrepreneurial example

Success brought honors that covered many walls, including the Restaurant Business High Performance Leadership Award, Restaurants and Institutions Magazine's Executive of the Year Award, the Horatio Alger Award and the Ella Brennan Savoir Faire Award from the American Culinary

Federation's New Orleans chapter.

Yet despite her trademark red blazer and her apparent pleasure in greeting patrons and serving up prime beef, lyonnaise potatoes and creamed spinach, Ms. Fertel was a shy woman who seemed bemused by all the attention.

"There's really no great mystery to what we do," she once said. "We have a great product and great people."

She made that statement in an interview about entrepreneurship for "A Business of Their Own," Gregory K. Ericksen's book about 12 successful businesswomen.

Hard work, sizzling success

Because of her international success, Ms. Fertel is often cited as a role model for aspiring businesswomen. But when she launched her business in 1965, such models were scarce.

That year, Ms. Fertel was a divorced mother of two teen-age sons who was making \$400 a month as a laboratory technician at Tulane University.

With her sons nearing college age, Ms. Fertel knew she would need more money and started scouring the classified advertisements in The Times-Picayune, looking for opportunities.

Chris Steak House was on the block, and Chris Matulich was asking \$18,000 for the restaurant at North Broad and Ursulines Avenue. Using her house as collateral, Ms. Fertel borrowed the \$18,000, plus \$4,000 for food and equipment.

On her first day she sold 35 steaks for about \$5 apiece, and because she was the only person on the premises who knew anything about butchering, Ms. Fertel, who stood 5-feet-2-inches tall and weighed 110 pounds, had to cut the 30-pound loins herself with a handsaw. In those early months she also did almost every other chore as well, including keeping the books, taking reservations, showing customers to tables and substituting for the dishwasher and chef on their days off.

Catering to the customer

Three months after she opened, Hurricane Betsy slammed into New Orleans, cutting off electricity to hundreds of thousands of people -- and threatening to spoil hundreds of pounds of refrigerated meat.

So she cooked everything she had, Ericksen said, and asked her brother to distribute it to people in need, many of whom later turned up as grateful customers.

"We went out of our way to please customers," Ms. Fertel told Ericksen. "We spoiled them. One of our regular Sunday customers was operated on for his teeth and couldn't bite into a steak. So I chopped his steak in the grinder, formed it into the same shape as before and served it to him. He was thrilled."

As her business grew, Ms. Fertel bought a building four blocks away and rented it out as a profitable party venue. In 1975, after fire struck the original restaurant, she moved the whole operation to North Broad and Orleans, where it has stayed ever since.

A name to chew on

At the new location Ms. Fertel had to come up with a new business name because the terms of the sale under which she bought her original restaurant forbade her to use Chris Steak House for any other eatery. Not wishing to lose the identity she was developing, Ms. Fertel simply added her first

name.

The name may have been quirky, but it was memorable. One writer for Fortune magazine quipped that it should be used as a sobriety test because, he said, anyone who could say "Ruth's Chris Steak House" three times couldn't possibly be drunk.

In 1976, when a loyal customer moved to Baton Rouge, he was so loyal that he regularly drove 80 miles each way for a steak. Tired of the commute, he pleaded with Ms. Fertel to let him open a restaurant in Baton Rouge.

It was a success from the beginning, Ms. Fertel said, and the start of a chain that now operates in 27 states and the District of Columbia, as well as Canada, Mexico, Puerto Rico and Asia.

#### Extending a helping hand

While she was making money, Ms. Fertel was also helping others. In addition to more conventional kinds of philanthropy, she remembered her own hard times and made a point of hiring single mothers as waitresses. When a friend decided to become a restaurateur, Ms. Fertel co-signed and guaranteed the business loan.

She was "extending a helping hand that leaves no fingerprints," a friend said.

Although she called herself lucky, Ms. Fertel worked hard from the beginning, telling Ericksen she was "always trying to do as well as the boys did."

Born Ruth Udstad, she grew up in the Plaquemines Parish community of Happy Jack, finished high school at 15 and graduated from Louisiana State University at 19 with a double major in chemistry and physics.

Ms. Fertel tried graduate school and teaching but didn't like either one. After her divorce, she found she had a flair for making drapes, spreading the fabric on her living-room floor and working on her hands and knees.

She gave that up when her knees gave out, then landed a job she liked in Tulane's cardiovascular research lab. Realizing she had reached a dead end and needed more money for her sons, she took a chance on the restaurant.

#### 'An American original'

"How she was able to take that little idea she had and go all the way with it was absolutely amazing," said Ella Brennan, a member of the family that runs Commander's Palace and other New Orleans restaurants. "This lady, to me, was extraordinary. She kept plowing along, and she built this empire. She did it very well, with style and grace."

"She might have had a much easier time of it all had she done something less daunting, but what fun would that be?" Esquire magazine food critic John Mariani said. "Ruth Fertel is an American original whose first aim has always been to please. And if she happened to make a fortune doing it, well, that's just fine with everybody."

Survivors include two sons, Jerry Fertel of Hot Springs, Ark., and Randy Fertel; and seven grandchildren.

A Mass will be said Friday at 11 a.m. at Lake Lawn Metairie Funeral Home, 5100 Pontchartrain Blvd. Visitation will be Thursday from 6 to 9 p.m. and Friday from 9 to 11 a.m.

Burial will be in Metairie Cemetery, in a tomb that she and her friend Lana Duke purchased and celebrated with a party in 1999.

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